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# Of Singing

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ELENA PASSARELLO

## *Of Singing*

*I will look out darkly  
and sing the morning myself: all consonants with no  
split in my tongue.*  
—Grace Butcher

Of the many considerable traits of songbirds, perhaps the most fascinating is how, in their absence, you can forget what they sound like, as if they never existed. Take, for example, a song-less prairie winter like the one in which I am currently mired, one whose January frigidity I've strained to shake off straight through February and on into March. Under the lead apron of this Iowa winter, I've forgotten how there are entire months of mornings that feature a dense and knotted mass of birdsong.

A marathon winter is a trial of the memory. As color and odor and certain kinds of light and smell are all sucked from my experience, I find myself attempting to will into view a tree with leaves, or the feel of air through a window, or even the lines delineating each car's separate space in the world, demarcations long erased by ground-in snow. You know a winter is especially harsh when you find yourself pining for a parking lot's Spartan white lines. There have been bird noises over the course of this long winter: caws and hoots and the occasional screech—but very little song. In my yard (which I can barely picture as any color but white), the landlady has hung a dozen bird feeders in the trees and cut trenches into the snow so that she can refill the feeders every morning, no matter how snowy. Since January, the only birds that visit the yard have been crows, and I know this fact displeases her.

For some reason, this particular winter, the yard has become a hot spot for swarms of the big black birds, dozens more than the five or six that dropped in during previous winters. From about dawn until ten-thirty in the morning, scores of enormous crows dot the lawn. (I've never seen crows bigger than Iowa crows. It's almost as if they saw how large Iowa hawks could get and then decided to compete.) They yell in a way that reminds me of the barking of dogs. They

bicker as they walk in twos; they tag-team squirrels or butt each other from the ledge of the trough that my landlady fills with water on above-freezing mornings. If I wake up after eleven, I've missed them, and instead must watch the squirrels take their later shift. After the dinner break, these squirrels give way to lumbering, palsied possums. Both species are infinitely less interesting to me.

The way they've commandeered my yard reminds me of the brash crows in Aesop—that vain female with the horrible voice who lets a hunk of cheese fall from her beak so she can sing for a trickster fox. That wiser male who, unable to stretch his beak into a pitcher of water, fills it with pebbles until the displaced water spills over the top. I think of Shakespeare, a master in stealing other people's stories, whom a contemporary called an "upstart crow beautified with our own feathers," alluding to yet another fabled black bird who replaced his plumage with peacock quills. Shakespeare himself uses crows for pathetic fallacy in *Julius Caesar* and predatory imagery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They represent ugliness in several lines of *Romeo and Juliet*, lucklessness in *Henry VI*, and death in nearly every tragedy. Perhaps Shakespeare certainly did pluck this imagery from the myriad cultures, both east and west, that associate crows, jackdaws, and ravens with the dead. I mention this to prove that, every morning, these crows arrive in my suburban yard with quite a reputation.

My cat, who is much more prone to scheduling herself than I am, never misses the crows' morning visits. She sits in the window seat, which is level to the yard, waiting in her benign and declawed manner for one of the murder to wander close to the pane. She tilts her head and the crow does too and both always seem totally fearless. Even if I cross behind her to watch their exchange, she and the crow hold each other's gaze. I am the only one who seems uneasy about their meetings.

I marvel at how they match each other in size and weight and stillness: one black, one grey, one with wings and the other a tail. The exchange is brief, a staring contest into which neither participant is fully invested, and it usually ends just as quietly as it began, with the crow wandering away or the cat nodding off. As if the winter could freeze instinct—dissuading the cat from causing further trouble or the crow from cutting her a wide berth. It occurred to

me, at the end of one of their match-ups, that this was one of the few times any crow in the yard was silent.

On a recent morning, both the cat and I stared out the window for what felt like hours, watching a crow convalesce, and eventually give in, on the back lawn. Disoriented and woozy, he made a staggering, fragmented descent from the wires above my roof down to the snowy ground. First, he sagged on the wire, rocking with the wake of the wind and the impact of the other crows' movements. A few beats later, the crow wavered on a low branch of oak, until one of its brothers knocked it over with a caw. From there, he (as all crows somehow seem male to me) took refuge on the railroad fence under the tree. This was a shock: to see a crow in a spot usually relegated to lowly squirrels or long-departed songbirds, one so low no healthy crow would deign to stop on it.

His carriage lacked the sleekness that most crows adopt. This dying crow hunched low and pained. His feathers sprang up in rumpled swatches, giving him the outline of a vagrant hunkering into a patchy frock coat. When he pitched forward into the water trough, I couldn't stand to watch him any further. I left the window and rinsed the breakfast dishes. When I came back, the cat was asleep and the crow was beak down in the brittle snow. Above and around him, the murder traded sounds—those loud caws in a pointed, but still indecipherable, syncopation. Were they brainstorming? Yelling out a plan to remove him from the yard? Were they mocking him or mourning him or pointedly trying to ignore him, making sure that Creation saw how well crows can cope? As they hollered, the dying crow's claws curled like witches' shoes under a house. This was the most dramatic scene a bird had ever offered me.

I discovered the evening haunt of my morning crows that very night, after work, as I walked along the river to where my car was parked. My yard crows (and several hundred others) had commandeered the bare branches of the trees on the river-walk, by the art museum. The lights of the museum and the black of the river and sky somehow made the crows seem chocolate brown in color. They were still dark enough to disappear in the trees, though. A thousand bobbing limbs, not creaking, but cawing as they swayed. But not just cawing: their noise was a series of guttural accidentals in the style of a horde of locusts, a noise that moved around in the bald

and splintering air. The way raw sound would sound if said sound could form a swarm.

A few weeks later, in the early morning, I was walking from the same parking lot to work, and I heard the first songbird of the year. She sang solo a few paces from my office in a thin, crystalline whistle, and I didn't know what to do with the sound. It was such a counter-melody to the light and the landscape and the icy air in my chest.

It was then that I remembered the mob of riverfront crows and the slow death of the crow on my lawn, and I felt myself relax in their familiarity. I realized that, had someone told me a story right then that referenced "bird," these would be the first images my mind would summon. After fourteen weeks of winter, all birds were crows. Not the blue jays of my youth or my favorite birds, the cuckoos. Not the bird sounds my grandfather taught me to whistle: bob-white, whippoorwill, dove, catbird, nuthatch, thrasher. Not the owls Iowans can hear *in flagrante delicto* every evening in May. Not the red-headed woodpecker that showed up in the yard, clearly lost, in November. Nor the ibises and egrets of the swamp where I played as a girl, nor the little brown sparrows after which my family is named. After the winter, this was "bird" to me—a hulking, moribund body and a barely visible mob.

Inky and scrutinous, tough and inquisitive, the crow is not without intelligence or humor. Said humor, however, isn't light like a pastiche. It is met not with a giggle or guffaw, but instead an atonal, flattened caw. And while animal behaviorists have scrutinized the minutiae of each songbird's specific melody for centuries, scientists are only just beginning to study the vocal patterns of crows.

Songbirds are vocal learners, as are humans, two kinds of bats and a few random primates. The sounds that warblers, meadowlarks, and mockingbirds make are not instinctive. They are the result of intense pre-pubescent listening and the evolution of an appropriated wind instrument called a syrinx—a fusion of bronchia and trachea. Because their song is acquired outside the egg, it can be personalized, an individual song-learning process that allows for embellishments in even the simplest "cuckoo." This signature sound makes us feel as if our local birds are singing just for us. Eighteenth-century naturalist Gilbert White (a man who seems to combat his own loneliness by ceaselessly cataloguing the fauna

around his country home) marveled at how, to set themselves apart from fellow suitors in his fen, male cuckoos begin their call on C, C-sharp, D, or somewhere in between. I imagine him staring out the window of his silent home, quill in hand, ear pressed to the thin, cool pane.

Crows, on the other hand, are born crowing. Like the majority of the animal kingdom, their noise is innate and imprinted. For centuries, humans dismissed their singular caw as the beaked version of a bark, a hiss, or a roar: the simple noise of a simple vocal mechanism. It is only recently that ornithologists have noticed unique communicative patterns in the frequency or syncopation of caws—a darker language that, though vocally crippled, is much more rhythmically complex than birdsong. They've also discovered that crows can make pitches too low for human ears to register. As if a subterranean conversation between these black beasts has been going on, right under our noses, all this time. We've only just begun to develop systems and technical instruments to monitor this primal crow talk.

Then again, perhaps parts of us have always known about it, hence the epochs of dark crow folklore. Or perhaps we knew crow language but forgot it, and need to be reminded of it somehow.

Maybe we see crows throughout cultures as scavengers and avengers and harbingers of death because those low rumblings speak to the parts of us that also use instinct to listen, parts that hear the same music within ourselves. After all, until Lucy's hyoid bone stretched an extra centimeter and dropped into the cradle of her adult larynx, humans had no power for speech or song either. For several million years, man could only crow, too.

This all led me to think of human singing—how American pop music fans are slowly evolving away their ear for sweet voices in exchange for sounds that, while striking and artful, are very different from song. Over the past fifty-five years, we've been re-conditioning ourselves by listening to voices that critics enjoy calling “primal”: screams and hollers and stutter-step articulations; sounds aerated by whiskey and smokes; scatting and mumbling and slanting of the mouth so that the air rushes out in the shape of a sneer. If these sounds were to fully overtake recorded human song, half of me would miss traditional voices: Doris Day and Maria Callas and

Smokey Robinson and Lata Mangeshkar. But the other half can't help but admit that singing should never be the only call of the musical "species" known as Rock Band.

One would never compliment, for instance, the "song" of The Clash. While Joe Strummer and Mick Jones (both wiry slumpers with inky black hair) created what I consider two of the most powerful albums of the twentieth century, the noises they make throughout *London Calling* and *Combat Rock* are not singing. They chant, they incant, they croak, and they most certainly crow, and all of this makes music, but The Clash do not sing.

Several other bands that fascinate me sport brooding, hulking "front-men," but lack lead *singers*: The Troggs, The Velvet Underground, The Birthday Party, The Rolling Stones, The Kinks, The Dismemberment Plan, The Modern Lovers, The Chrome Cranks, The Cure, The Stooges, The Flaming Lips, The Arctic Monkeys, The Talking Heads, The Kings of Leon, The Gories, The Pixies, The Animals, The MC5, The Sonics, The Ex, The Fall, The Faces, The The. I've spent my adult life listening to these men sing, and I believe that, in many respects, they have shaped my consciousness.

There was a time before, in my first dozen years, when I thought music must be crooned (Garfunkel and Gaye and Green and McCartney and Williams and Williams, Jr.), but because everyone else in the seventh grade had a copy of *Nevermind*, I played along, gritting my teeth through the first few listens of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" until, eventually, I became gleefully accustomed to the mush-mouthed accidentals of Cobain's vocal delivery. I found emotional power in the way these unsung voices crashed into the rolling, three-instrument fuzz that accompanied them. I considered them so carefully that I forgot the other sides of song.

I'm not saying that all rock songs are tuneless. Nor am I saying that all popular vocal artists must croon to be artful. There is plenty of feeling, technique, and merit in a raw delivery. Tom Waits crows, Bob Dylan caws, Patti Smith bays, and Corin Tucker screeches, and all their songs make sense to me. It's obvious that some subjects are made for tuneful voices—like romance and youth and friendship and sunshine—but occasionally, they sound even better when screamed or shrieked, or belted out a half-step sharp.

Not to mention, in this wintry climate that is the Western world after 1950, some sentiments can't be sung as prettily as others. Would I really want to hear a trained tenor sing "Masters of War?" Would a soul singer do justice to "California Über Alles?" What would happen if a boys' choir tried to grasp the grit of "My Dingaling" or *Let It Bleed*?

And how exciting was it to hear woozy, tone-deaf Sid Vicious snatch the honeyed line of "My Way" from Sinatra? Sinatra, with his ironed cuffs and suite at the Sands, could never crow like Vicious. Perhaps Sid's only real contribution to music was his cover of "My Way"; in his throat, the song became a hideous dirge about pre-fab stardom, or Enoch Powell, or the garbage strike of '77, or something. Ditto for Blixa Bargeld, whose terrifying "Over the Rainbow" somehow retains the doe-eyed wonder of Judy Garland, but ices it with an opiate wink toward the truly fantastic.

This makes me wonder if, perhaps, these voices are the crows of popular music: looming, compelling, able to pull a ragged, menacing beauty from the everyday. Gritty rock vocalists, like a swarm of birds in the yard, bring their audiences closer to death and menace and, sometimes, to quieter moments made even more powerful because of their unexpectedness. Not to mention, these voices know how to hide things from us, or at least from the parts of us that listen to music while we wash dishes or drive cars or throw back a few shots. The other parts, the parts we don't have to teach how to listen, get the full impact of the voice. Thus, while ever-present and dependable in the most maudlin way, these voices find ways to remain mysterious. It's tough to articulate where they're hitting when they hit you. And this surprise is called rock and roll.

Just this weekend, I heard 2008's second songbird, an early-to-rise soloist outside my bedroom window. They say that songbirds sing at dawn not to greet the day, but to claim it; they're announcing to their rivals that they did not perish in the night. I thought of this, how lonesome it seemed, before forcing my eyes to open and my body to sit up and look at things. As spring was still a dangerous month away, I heard the song as a peculiar and fruitless occupation: trilling by oneself in the old, hard snow.

Then, as is my custom, I woke my boyfriend, because mornings make me lonely, by tossing and turning and coughing him into con-



sciousness. As usual, I devised some arbitrary anecdote to engage him and keep him from falling back asleep. I described the solitary bird in the front yard and the other songbird outside my office. I noted how, in a few weeks, the two of them would be joined by hundreds of others in the welcome, incessant song of spring and summer, and the crows would find someplace else to go. Like most topics I think about when left to my own devices, this is not enough to keep a man awake. He turned away from the window, pulling the quilt over his ears so that only his spiky black hair was visible.

Resolved to start the day on my own, I got out of bed, found the cat, and carried her to the backyard window to greet our crows. In the dishwater light that is the only light I can currently picture, we stretched and turned to the window. The crows cawed as I yawned and the cat burbled. Lips and beak and cat-mouth opening so our sounds could escape. We could hear the breath and noise that came from within us as announcements. Our open mouths made a disparate and strangely comfortable triad.